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C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 002645

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: PARLIAMENTARIAN RECOUNTS HARASSMENT AT  
LOCAL LEVEL

REF: ADDIS 1611

Classified By: Classified by CDA T. Kirk McBride for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Member of Parliament and Central Committee member of the opposition Oromo People's Congress Mekonen Geleta reported harassment by woreda (municipal equivalent) officials of the Oromia Region during a recent trip to visit constituents and deliver official Parliamentary documents. During a two-day trip, Mekonen said he was prevented from meeting constituents and was insulted and followed by security officials and the woreda administrator. Such credible reports of obstructive tactics taken by local level officials to prevent a Parliamentarian from carrying out the basic functions of his job are a glaring example of the downward trajectory of democracy in rural Ethiopia. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Major Mekonen Geleta (strictly protect), a Member of Parliament (MP) and member of the Central Committee of the opposition party Oromo People's Congress (OPC), recently described to Deputy Pol/Econ Counselor a trip he took to visit his constituency in Horoguduru zone, Kombolcha woreda, Oromia Region during the week of October 12. Mindful of potential interference by local authorities, he took the precaution of bringing along a letter from Parliament indicating that his travel was official. The goals of the trip were to deliver some letters and reports on HIV and women's issues (including requests for statistical data) to the woreda Record Office as well as to visit his constituents.

¶3. (C) Mekonen traveled to the woreda level with another OPC member, Seleshi Belay, an elected member of the Oromiya region Parliament from Guduru woreda, who had just been released from prison in May after serving a three-year term for inciting violence in Guduru woreda following the 2005 elections. (Note: There were several deaths as a result of the violence in Guduru woreda following the 2005 elections. It is commonly believed that these deaths were at the hands of the police and the military, and that many opposition leaders were tried as scapegoats for the violence. End note). They arrived at the first woreda office on October 14 and were received by a secretary who told them the woreda officials were in the countryside and would not meet with them. She accepted their letter and put a stamp on it, but said they were not permitted to visit any constituents. Mekonen and his companion waited the whole day outside of the office.

¶4. (C) According to Mekonen, on October 15 they travelled by public bus to another nearby woreda and two security personnel assigned by the woreda Administrator travelled on the bus with them while the woreda administrator and two other individuals followed the bus in a private vehicle from village to village. Approximately 35 other individuals were

also on the bus. Mekonen said he was prevented from leaving the bus to meet with constituents in any of the villages, but he reported that some of his constituents came by car and motorcycle and drove in front of or in back of the bus.

15. (C) During the course of the two days he spent in Oromia, he said he was unable to meet with any constituents. He was only able to stop in the woreda Records Office to deliver the official papers. The woreda security officials, while provocative, did not incite him to break the law, he said. They did however, order the arrest of one student in the city who had welcomed Mekonen. He said the student was released after one night in jail. Mekonen reported that during his last trip to Oromia in February his efforts were similarly stymied. On that occasion, he said, police from the two woredas surrounded his 86-year-old mother's house in an attempt to harass and intimidate him.

6 (C) Comment: The Embassy finds this report to be credible because it tracks with reports we have heard from other opposition legislators who have tried to visit their constituencies in recent months. The fact that an elected representative with written permission from Parliament to visit his constituency is being obstructed by local woreda officials is a glaring example of the actions the ruling party is taking to tightly restrict political space for any opposition party at the local level. It is yet another indication of the downward trajectory for democratic institutions in which there is little to no opportunity for opposition parties to engage with their members let alone actively oppose government policies.

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